Fears and Facts about the Immigration Debate

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Fears and Facts
About the Immigration Debate

Fear: Immigrants don't pay taxes.
Fact: Immigrants pay taxes, in the form of income, property, sales, and taxes at the federal and state level. A range of studies find that immigrants pay between $90 and $140 billion a year in federal, state, and local taxes. Even undocumented immigrants pay income taxes as well, as evidenced by the Social Security Administration's "suspense file" (taxes that cannot be matched to workers' names and social security numbers), which grew by $20 billion between 1990 and 1998.

Fear: Immigrants come here to take welfare.
Fact: Immigrants come to work and reunite with family members. The ratio between immigrant use of public benefits and the amount of taxes they pay is consistently favorable to the U.S. In one estimate, immigrants earn about $240 billion a year, pay about $90 billion a year in taxes, and use about $5 billion in public benefits. In another estimate, immigrant tax payments total $20 to $30 billion more than the amount of government services they use.

Fear: Immigrants are a drain on the U.S. economy.
Fact: The largest wave of immigration to the U.S. since the early 1900s coincided with our lowest national unemployment rate and fastest economic growth. During the 1990s, half of all new workers were foreign-born, filling gaps left by native-born workers in both high- and low-skill jobs. Immigrants fill jobs in key sectors, start their own businesses, and contribute to a thriving economy. The net benefit of immigration to the U.S. is nearly $10 billion annually.

Fear: Immigrants don't want to learn English or become Americans.
Fact: Within ten years of arrival, more than 75% of immigrants speak English well. Demand for English classes at the adult level far exceeds supply. Greater than 33% of immigrants are naturalized citizens; given increased immigration in the 1990s, this figure will rise as more legal permanent residents become eligible for naturalization.

Fear: Today's immigrants are different than those of 100 years ago.
Fact: The percentage of the U.S. population that is foreign-born now stands at 11.5%; in the early 1900s it was approximately 15%. Immigrants 100 years ago initially often settled in mono-ethnic neighborhoods, spoke their native languages, and built up newspapers and businesses that catered to their fellow émigrés. They also experienced the same types of discrimination that today's immigrants face, and integrated into American culture at a similar rate.

Fear: Most immigrants cross the border illegally.
Fact: Around 75% of today's immigrants have legal permanent (immigrant) visas; of the 25% that are undocumented, 40% overstayed temporary (non-immigrant) visas.

Fear: Weak border enforcement has lead to more illegal immigration.
Fact: From 1986 to 1998, the Border Patrol's budget increased six-fold and the number of agents stationed on our southwest border doubled to 8,500. The Border Patrol also toughened its enforcement strategy, heavily fortified typical urban entry points and pushed migrants into dangerous desert areas, hoping to deter crossings. Instead, the undocumented immigrant population doubled during that time to 8 million. Insufficient legal avenues for immigrants to enter the U.S., compared with the number of jobs in need of workers, has significantly contributed to this current conundrum.

Fear: The war on terrorism can be won through immigration restrictions.
Fact: No security expert has said that restrictive immigration measures would have prevented the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Since 9/11, the myriad of measures targeting immigrants in the name of national security have netted no terrorism prosecutions. Good intelligence, not restrictive immigration policies, is the key to preventing terrorist attacks.

Source: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops / <www.justiceforimmigrants.org>